



METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT OF NASHVILLE AND DAVIDSON COUNTY

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Mayor

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STATE OF METRO ADDRESS

*By Mayor Karl Dean
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Vice Mayor Neighbors, members of the Metro Council, the Judiciary, other elected officials and distinguished guests ...

We come together at a challenging time for our country, for our city. But as we gather here on this great plaza overlooking our downtown – next to our beautiful new transit station that a year ago did not exist – we are reminded that Nashville is a city, that despite extraordinary circumstances, continues to grow and continues to progress.

We benefit from a diverse economy and a unique identity. We are Music City. The performance we just heard from award-winning singer, songwriter and guitarist Keith Urban, (whose new album has already hit No. 1 – I might add) is a tremendous example of the talent and creative force that drives our city. Thank you Keith for being here.

Keith and his wife could live anywhere in world, but they chose to make their home here. They, like the rest of us, recognize that this is a great place to live and a great place to raise a family. And our goal should be to make sure it stays that way now and for future generations.

Today that challenge is even greater. While Nashville is faring better than many other cities, we are not immune to the effects of a down economy. We will have less money next year to operate our government in part due to historic declines in sales tax revenue. And managing through this year will require us to make some tough decisions. But that is my job – to manage through today and plan for our future.

In a week we will present next year's operating budget to the Metro Council. There will be cuts in every area. Just like families and businesses in our community, we will have to manage with the resources we have. Therefore, I will not ask for a property tax increase.

Families' budgets are already stretched thin. Water and sewer rate increases will soon take effect. And the state-mandated property reappraisal was just completed by the Assessor's Office. We cannot ask our citizens to pay more. And I will not.

Some positions will be eliminated; some hours of operation will be changed. But where we have to make reductions, we will do so judiciously and with compassion. Driving our decisions will be a focus on protecting direct services to the public – those things that citizens come to depend on, especially in times like these. These are the things that make our quality of life in Nashville so great, great libraries and parks. And we need to protect them.

The priorities of my administration have been clear from day one – education, public safety and economic development. The world we are living in today is much different than it was 19 months ago when I took office. I don't know that any of us could have anticipated the changes that have come. But our priorities have not changed. And by setting priorities and sticking to them, even when times are tough, we stay focused and won't lose sight of those things that most critical to our city's success.

As you have heard me say many times before, I truly believe our best days are yet to come. Nashville's future is bright. But to see that future come to pass, to reap the full benefits of all that past leaders have built, we must make sound financial decisions today, stay focused on our priorities and yet, not be afraid to be bold, dream big and invest in our city's future.

As we look forward, our resources may be limited in the short term, but our goals should not be. We have a history of this in Nashville – of daring to achieve great heights, of making progressive decisions that set our city up for future success, even when times are tough. Let me give you two examples.

First, Centennial Park: During extremely challenging times in the late 1800s, city leaders came together to create a months-long event that attracted thousands of visitors to Nashville – the Centennial Exposition of 1897.

One orator described the economic environment of the time like this: “We had little money, we had great courage; times were as hard as flint, banks were popping and cracking all over the Union; every day newspaper columns were but records of bank failures and business enterprises being thrown into the hands of receivers.” A description of economic times more challenging than even those we face today.

But the exposition was a tremendous success. It is considered responsible for the creation of public park systems across our state, and was widely accredited with helping Nashville pull through the economic crisis.

The second example, our current downtown convention center: When proposed it faced much criticism, but it has transformed our city.

It was the first major public investment in our downtown redevelopment, and we have Mayor Fulton to thank for that. He was a visionary. And the leaders that came after him – both Mayor Bredesen and Mayor Purcell – built upon that success. Today our downtown includes a world-class public entertainment venue, a symphony hall, the Frist Museum, the Country Music Hall of Fame, the refurbished Ryman Auditorium, thousands of residential units and our renowned honky-tonks on Lower Broadway. Nashville would not be the city it is today without the resurgence of our downtown.

So today, as we consider the future of our city, I want to talk about four things that we will focus on this year that will help ensure our continued success and move our city forward through these trying times.

Starting with the capital budget ...

In addition to filing the operating budget next month, we will file my administration's first capital spending plan. As we were preparing to file a capital plan last year, the credit markets froze and the capital budget was put on hold. As we determine how to spend our limited capital resources, it is important – just as we do with the operating budget – to set priorities and have a budget that reflects them.

Our capital budget will include funds for critical improvements to some of our most highly-utilized schools. Classroom additions and renovations will allow us to remove the use of some 40 portable buildings at elementary schools across the city and create a better learning environment for our students.

The budget includes funding to begin planning for two additional police precincts in areas of our city most in need. 2008 marked a fifth straight year in overall crime reduction. Nashville's crime rate is now the lowest it has been in almost two decades, and helping our crime-fighting efforts is a fully-staffed Police Department for the first time in years. We have added well over 100 sworn officers to our police force since I took office.

But public safety is an area where we can never rest on our laurels. And for the foreseeable future, we need to continue adding officers to our police department. By adding precincts in the Madison area and southeast area of our city over the next several years, we will be able to reassign how our precincts cover our county, and that will provide more community-based policing for every neighborhood in Nashville.

And in the area of economic development, funding will be available to plan for the construction of the 28th Avenue connector. The need for it is something I've heard about almost since I moved to Nashville 30 years ago, and it's time to do it. It will connect Baptist Hospital to Meharry, TSU and Fisk to Vanderbilt, Centennial Park to Hadley. And nearby along Charlotte will be a new, LEED-certified headquarters facility for our Metro Public Health Department, which we will build through a partnership with HCA. These two projects will open that part of our city to great opportunity for economic development.

And we will invest more than \$20 million in our downtown riverfront, which will act as a catalyst for development on both sides of the Cumberland, especially the east bank of the river.

These are the fundamentals – education, public safety and economic development. But our capital budget will also help us grow those things that make Nashville such a great place to live – our parks, greenways, our sidewalks, bikelanes and libraries.

We will purchase adjoining parcels of land to Peeler Park in Madison and Warner Parks in West Nashville.

Which leads directly into the second thing I want to talk about – mass transportation and the environment ...

This facility we are at today is a great example of the direction our city needs to be headed. To your right you can see three of six new hybrid buses that have just been added to MTA's fleet. This fall they will be used, along with other infrastructure improvements, to begin Bus Rapid Transit service along the busy Gallatin Road corridor. My goal is to expand BRT to the main thoroughfares throughout Davidson County.

Gas prices are down from this time last year, but chances are not great that prices will stay low for long. MTA is still experiencing record numbers of ridership. For economic and environmental reasons, we need to make mass transit a viable transportation option for more people in our city, and Bus Rapid Transit is a step forward in that direction.

To go even further in the area of mass transit we need regional cooperation, and we're making progress there too. Legislation is moving through the General Assembly with support from all over the state that will enable local municipalities to create a dedicated revenue source for mass transit in our region.

I have also set a goal to make Nashville the greenest city in the Southeast. Last week the Green Ribbon Committee presented 16 goals and 71 recommendations to make Nashville a more sustainable city. Over the next several months we will begin to systematically implement each of the short-term recommendations – what I call low-hanging fruit. And while we can't start all of the long-term projects that I would like right now, we will begin to implement two significant recommendations.

First, Metro should lead by example and we will immediately begin the process of retrofitting all General Services managed Metro Buildings to use less energy and save money through increased efficiency and conservation. I am proud to announce that the renovated Howard School building will open next year as Metro's first LEED-certified public building. This is something that was not required by law, and not even part of the original plans, but a significant goal we'll be able to achieve with little additional cost.

And second, we will expand the use of electric, hybrid and biodiesel vehicles to reduce energy use and lessen harmful greenhouse gas emissions.

An important environmental achievement we were able to make just recently was the approval of legislation for the Clean Water Infrastructure Program. It creates dedicated revenue for stormwater and will provide us with much-needed funding for water and sewer infrastructure improvements.

Nashville is situated in a perfect location – right along the Cumberland River. Access to water will never hamper our growth. But our river is a vital resource that we must protect. For the last decade, our river has slowly improved, and this legislation will ensure we have safe, clean drinking water for generations to come.

Another important part of being a sustainable city is preserving and making available plenty of green space for citizens to enjoy. We are working on a community park plan – a way for neighborhoods to develop green space specific to their needs, whether it's a community garden, a play ground or just open space for families to gather and play.

We will also seek private funding to assist our Greenways staff in hiring a professional firm to develop an Open Space Plan for Davidson County. There are economic and livability benefits to preserving open space. A plan will recommend a timeline on how best to protect our critical natural resources. And this will allow Metro to attract additional private and grant funding not currently accessible.

The third thing we need to be focused on this year is the development of a new downtown convention center ...

The most important capital investment we can make for our city's future is the development of a new downtown convention center and headquarters hotel.

Last week we presented to the Metro Council a plan for moving forward, starting with the acquisition of land. Legislation is currently before the Council that would allow us to purchase the parcels that make up the proposed center's 15-acre site south of Broadway.

This project may seem daunting given current economic conditions, but I believe that only further underscores its need. Tourism is one of the largest industries in Nashville, second only to healthcare, responsible for providing nearly 60,000 jobs and over \$100 million in direct tax contributions to our city. Aside from creating over 3,000 jobs during its construction, the Music City Center, once opened, will draw hundreds of thousands of new tourists to Nashville, who will pay for this center, and will generate many millions in additional tax revenue. When the doors open in early 2013, our economy will have improved and we will be uniquely positioned to take advantage of it.

The fourth and last topic I want to discuss with you today – that is absolutely essential to our city's success – is our schools.

We have a great number of devoted teachers and staff working in our public schools committed to our students and their individual success. But despite the best of intentions, we are unable to say that all of our students are getting the education they need and deserve to succeed in life. This is an economic issue, a moral issue and quite frankly, a civil rights issue.

By now, most of you probably are aware that for five consecutive years Nashville Public Schools have failed to meet federal No Child Left Behind standards. And because of that, we are in what's called Restructuring I. The State has partial control of our school district. Our students right now are taking TCAP tests for this year, and if we fail to meet standards again, the State will be required to consider governance change for our schools.

What's more – even if we meet testing standards this year, the chance of us meeting standards in subsequent years is not high. Standards are going up.

Starting next year, the state is instituting a program called the Tennessee Diploma Project. It's an initiative of Governor Bredesen, and one that I greatly applaud. Right now, Tennessee schools are measured well below national standards. We have some of the lowest state standards in the country. The Tennessee Diploma Project will revise our testing standards to better measure for college-readiness and put Tennessee schools on par with other states.

This is a good thing. It says to our students we believe in you. We believe you will be able to succeed to the highest standards in our country. And when you set high expectations – for anyone – they tend to meet them. But in the short term, this presents a challenge.

To me, it comes down to four areas of reform: teacher recruitment and retention; increased school choice; engaging our youth and transforming our existing schools.

We are making some strides in these areas. We have attracted two national nonprofits to Nashville to focus on teacher recruitment. This fall, 50 new Teach for America teachers and 100 new teachers recruited by The New Teacher Project will enter Metro classrooms.

We've started a pilot afterschool program with a career-based curriculum for students in middle school – an age group that we know is underserved in this area. A student's performance in the 8th grade is one of the best predictors of their likelihood to graduate from high school. If we can get them engaged in a structured afterschool program, the benefits will carry over into their in-school time.

We are also making headway in the area of school choice. The Alternative High School Initiative, which we announced this time last year, is helping us expand our nontraditional school options. Added to our school portfolio this year, there will be a second Big Picture School and a new Diploma Plus School, which targets students who are over age and under accredited. And legislation is currently pending before the State Legislature to expand our ability to use charter schools.

And we need to be doing more. Adding new programs and a handful of new schools is not enough. Our schools have changed, our demographics have changed, and the needs of our students to be prepared for the 21st century workforce have changed. But the way we are running our schools have stayed the same. We need aggressive education reform.

Other districts have done this, in cities like New Orleans, New York, Boston, D.C. and Chicago, whose challenges are much greater than the ones we face here. I have spent time visiting these cities. The John F. Kennedy high school in the Bronx – what was a 6,000-student comprehensive high school – has been divided into six separate schools with six different principals and sets of teachers. This new structure has given the students more individual attention, and attendance and test scores have gone up.

Aggressive reforms are doable here in Nashville. I want you to know that I think about and work on our schools every single day, and I'm not going stop until I'm convinced that we have a system that gives all of our students, regardless of race or economic status, an opportunity to graduate from our schools ready to succeed in college and careers. And if we do this, as a city, there will be no stopping us.

As I have said for two years now, it's all connected. Education, public safety and economic development – if we get the first two right, the third will follow. Our national economy presents a challenge, but it's nothing our city hasn't managed through before. And while managing through today, we can still plan and invest in our future. It's what our city has always done – kept an eye on what lies ahead, and by doing so, we will be an even greater city when the economy improves.

So, as I close my report to Nashvillians, I thank you for this opportunity to be mayor during these trying yet exciting times. It's an honor and a privilege, and I look forward to the year ahead.

Thank you.

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